



COMMENTARY

CONGRESS NEEDS TO ANSWER TO THE PEOPLE

By ADAM PUTNAM

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According to a new survey, just about anything inspires more confidence in people than the U.S. Congress.

In an annual review of public opinion, The Gallup Organization says that the American people have less confidence in Congress than any of the 16 societal institutions it asked people to rank. You name it - banks, labor unions, HMOs, the presidency - all inspire higher levels of confidence than the U.S. House and Senate.

This is bad news for everyone who has been elected to represent a district or a state in the nation's capital. Republicans rightfully believe this loss of confidence was responsible for losing the majority position in Congress last year. And Democrats should be very troubled that public confidence has fallen even further in the months since they assumed control on Capitol Hill.

There are many reasons for this slide in confidence. But I think one thing is certain: Confidence in the institution of Congress cannot improve until the elected leaders change from the old ways of conducting the people's business and adopt more open and accountable measures. In a word: transparency.

You would not think that the push for more open government should be a partisan issue. After all, there shouldn't be any deep-seated philosophical reasons for why one party favors more open and accountable government over the other. Indeed, both parties speak often of the need for more openness and accountability. But when it comes to leadership in Congress, there has been a difference between words and actions. The recent battle in the House of Representatives over so-called earmark spending requests illustrates this.

First, it is important to note that earmarks - special requests for spending that come from congressmen and senators - are not all bad. There are some very good programs that have received funding by earmarks. I, myself, have requested funding for a number of deserving programs ranging from support for local law enforcement agencies fighting the scourge of methamphetamine abuse in Hillsborough and Polk counties to funds to improve fisheries and marine habitats in the Gulf. You can see a list of all these programs on my Web page at www.adamputnam.house.gov. I think they are worthwhile requests, and I am willing to advocate for them.

The problem with earmark spending is when it is done secretly, without the opportunity to measure the value of a specific program in the open. Last year, the Republican House majority had rules in place to give congressmen the ability to challenge earmark spending when the bills came up for debate. The rules applied to all the budget, spending and taxation bills in the House.

But this year, the new House leadership - after paying lip service to the idea of transparency - tried to backslide to a system that was cloaked in secrecy. The plan would have created an unaccountable “earmark czar,” a series of obscure slush funds, and no opportunity for open debate. In fact, earmarks would not have been made public until the very last moment, and there would be no way to even identify wasteful projects, let alone challenge them before a vote. With a \$2.7 trillion budget, this is precisely how “bridges to nowhere” get funded.

A funny thing happened on the way to the smoke-filled room, however. Through a series of parliamentary maneuvers, the minority party stopped the spending process dead in its tracks. We succeeded in forcing House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., and the author of the secret earmark process, U.S. Rep. David Obey, D-Wis., to back down and accept a more open and transparent approach.

This is an important victory, but it needn’t have become a partisan battle. With trust in Congress at an all-time low, we don’t need partisan arguments over the arrangement of the deck chairs on the Titanic. We need to all pick up buckets and start bailing.

It’s time for all members of Congress, regardless of their party, to take serious and substantial steps to earn back the trust of the people. Being open about how we spend the people’s money is one thing we must all do to bring more credit to this institution.

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